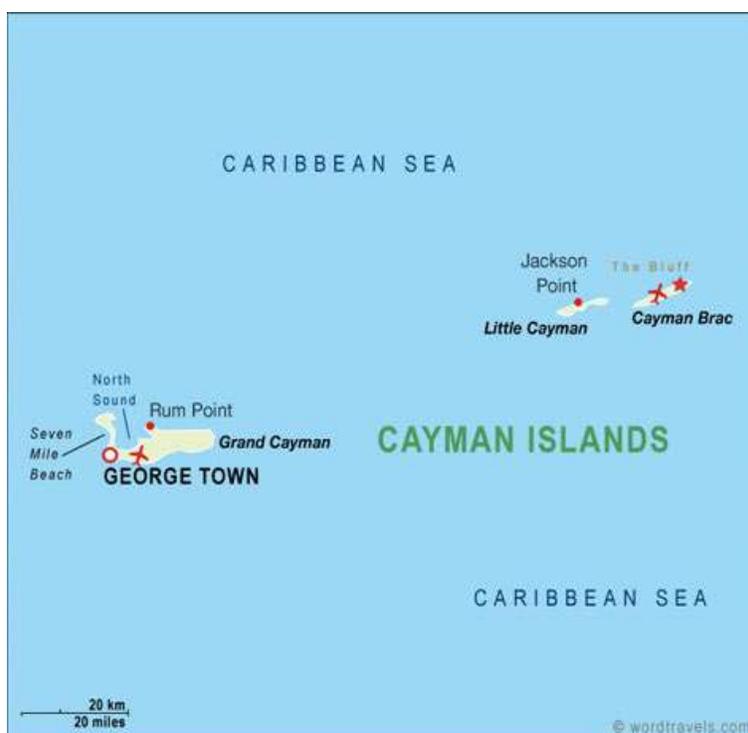




Cayman Brac & Little Cayman, British West Indies
June, 1986

I've learned two truisms in life. One is you can never go back and shouldn't even try, and second is that sooner or later your luck will run out. These both came true in 1986 when we chose to return to the Cayman Islands; this year staying at Cayman Brac (Bluff). From start to finish, one thing after another made the trip somewhat less than ideal. But it was still pretty damn good.



A bit of history...

Christopher Columbus sighted Cayman Brac and its sister island, Little Cayman, on 10 May 1503 when his ship was blown off course during a trip between Hispaniola and Panama. He named them "Las Tortugas" because of the many turtles he spotted on the islands. The Cayman Islands were renamed by Sir Francis Drake, who came upon the islands during a voyage in 1586. He used the word "Caymanas", taken from the Carib name for crocodiles after seeing many of the large crocodilians. Many people believe he had only seen the Rock Iguanas that inhabit the island today.

During the heyday of piracy, pirates would use Cayman Brac as a haven and a place to replenish their supplies as there are a number of fresh water wells on the island and had many sources of food included in the local flora and fauna.

The first settlement on Little Cayman was in the 17th century, when turtle fishermen set up camps. After a raid by a Spanish privateer, the settlements were abandoned in 1671 and the island was not resettled until 1833, when **Blossom Village** was established by a few families. By the early 20th century, a few hundred people lived on Little Cayman and exported phosphate ore, coconuts, and marine rope.

Our flight would take us from Omaha to Chicago to Miami and then on to Grand Cayman; a route we would never take again on an airline we would never use again. Upon arrival in Chicago, we were informed that due to weather and the fact that the pilot was over his scheduled flight time, our flight to Miami was delayed several hours and our flight from Miami to Grand Cayman would put us in too late to fly over to Cayman Brac as scheduled.

In Miami, Customer Services rearranged our flight and gave us the name of a hotel near the airport to overnight. The airline would of course pick up the tab - bull shit!. They later paid for the night's lodging but not the taxi fare, meals, or make any reparations for the loss of a day of diving. We flew into Grand Cayman expecting to see the asphalt runway and brick and tin airport of six years ago. What we flew into was a million dollar international airport with a beautiful modern A-frame lobby with marble floors and attached shops of fine gifts. Obviously casinos and the island economy was doing well. In the lobby on a black marble column under a security-protected case was a beautiful trophy for marlin fishing. The trophy was of a blue marlin breaking water. It was about three feet tall and was so realistic that we had to check to see if it wasn't a taxidermy mount. It was a work of art.

We rented a taxi and paid for the hotel room that the airline said they would pre-pay for the inconvenience, and spent the night in a dingy room with a loud air conditioner. The following morning we returned to the airport to connect with our flight over to Cayman Brac. We were flown in a small Cesna over to the island and landed on the more typical gravel runway with a single hut as the airport - that's the Cayman Islands we remembered. One difference, there was a large bump/rise in the middle of the airstrip.



We stayed at the Tiara Beach Hotel (now closed and abandoned). Our room was right on the beach next to the boardwalk leading to the dive shop and boats. The room was pleasant enough but generic - single bedroom, two beds, shower, and a small closet. We did have an air conditioner and of course there was the ever-present ceiling fan. A print of a tropical island adorned one wall, windows with glass shutters covered two walls.

We were situated next to the tennis court and the dive shop was next to that. The dining area was on the other side of the tennis court facing the ocean. Confused?



After checking in and shuffling our gear to the dive shop, we signed up for the checkout dive at "Radar Reef." The weather had been playing havoc with the diving creating waves too rough to dive the usual hot spots. It was rainy and windy every day we were there save one. So much for our luck with the weather. What was surprising was how clear the water was in spite of the poor weather and rough conditions. But along with the storms came pressure centers and headaches to match. The first dive became a battle to clear my ears. When the battle was over, I had a new battle with clearing my mask - a problem that plagued me for as long as I dove.

Well, not the best way to start but there we were and we were going to make the best of it. The dive shop and employees did everything in their power to make us feel welcome in spite of everything that had

happened and were as tired of the weather as we were. The air temp and water were about the same, 65-70 degrees.

The meals at Tiara were excellent and little can be said about the dining here that hasn't already been said about the other islands already. It was typically American favorites for lunch and for dinner it was more "islandized" with meals like coconut grouper. We were always served more food than we should have eaten.

Our next dive - "Duppy (Ghost) Reef" - was a good example of cattle-boat diving. Somehow we managed to run into another group of divers from Texas. At the reef, it was a mass of people in a small area with divers crawling over one another on and off the boat. The reef wasn't anything spectacular other than it did have nice sea fans. It was a shallow dive and we were in the water for about an hour.

We did experience something on this island that was new - drinks were free. As long as you drank there at the hotel, there was no charge or limit on what you drank. We drank a lot of banana daiquiris and beer. If you wanted a beer on the dive boat, then you had to pay. We occasionally broke with tradition and had a beer on the boat, but not very often.

Along with the overcast conditions, we were plagued with another condition - no-see-ums. The scientific name for the no see um is *Ceratopogonidae*, but it has accumulated many common names. These include the *sand flea*, *sand fly*, *biting midge* and *punkie* or *punky*. The insect is a bloodsucker many times smaller than a mosquito, but with a bite inversely more painful. The sting causes a large welt that can irritate the skin for several days, causing severe itching. It is tiny enough to pass through window screens, making it a nuisance. We ran into them on other islands but not to this extreme. Some divers combat them with OFF or Cutters and others use an Avon product called Skin-So-Soft. Anything helps but nothing works completely. Fortunately, they prefer the shade. Unfortunately, it was always cloudy so always shady.

"Radar Reef" was a pleasant dive along the communications cable that runs from Cayman Brac over to Grand Cayman. "Cemetery Wall" was a nice wall dive where we entered the wall at 90 feet and dove through the wall towards the surface. The weather was still overcast with occasional showers and the water conditions were rough. The major difficulty in rolling seas is getting in and out of the dive boat. For the boat's pilot, the challenge was to run the boat through the surf among the shallow reefs for anchoring.

"Kissame Reef" was named after a sunken tugboat that sits on its starboard side in the sand. It was a nice dive for nudibranchs and skates. For once, the conditions were calm but still cloudy.

A bit of information...

A **nudibranch** is a member of the Nudibranchia, a group of soft-bodied, marine gastropod mollusks which shed their shells after their larval stage. They are noted for their often extraordinary colors and striking forms. Currently, about 2,300 valid species of nudibranchs are known. Nudibranchs are often casually called sea slugs, but many sea slugs belong to several taxonomic groups which are not closely related to nudibranchs.



Skates are cartilaginous fish belonging to the family **Rajidae** in the superorder Batoidea of rays.



That evening during dinner, we were entertained by the children of South Bay Primary School. They were dressed in traditional costume and sang familiar songs like "Sloop John B." and "Lemmon Tree." It was very entertaining.

"The Shoots" on east Cayman Brac was appropriately named. A beautiful wall to dive, but swimming against the current sucked up a lot of air. On the return trip we shot by the wall.

"Patch Reef" was a deep wall dive where we saw large schools of black durgions - a beautiful but aggressive fish. It propels itself through the water effortlessly with continuous dorsal and ventral fins. They are coal black in color with the exception of a thin neon blue line where the fins meet the body. A few more fish descriptions...



Cow Fish and Trunk Fish are odd creatures. Both have a triangular-shaped body and small fins that are constantly moving. The cow fish is so named because of the appendages on its head that resemble horns.



The trumpet fish also vary in color depending on the surroundings. A long flat file-shaped fish with a narrow head and small mouth, these predators hang vertically among the sea grass and fans awaiting their prey.



Anemones look like giant gummy worms. Varying in color from yellow to green to purple, they look like a clump of baseball bats stuck together with their handles sticking up. At the slightest touch, they retract.



On June 6th we dove "End of Island Reef" - a shallow dive with pillar coral formations. There were large schools of grunts, butterfly fish, wrasse, parrot fish, rock beauties, etc. The weather was still overcast, windy, and a cool 65 degrees. That evening we were to make a night dive at "Buccaneer Reef." Those who chose to go met at the dive shop at 7:30. Included was a father and daughter who we struck up a conversation with on the trip to the dive site. The daughter had dove with Jacque Cousteau and the crew of the Calypso. It was part of a youth oceanography program. She was not impressed and it was her feeling that they were not safe divers. The French have a system of bobbing up and down at different depths and used a completely different set of tables than in the United States.

The night was overcast which made gearing up difficult and Dad was frustrated to the point of telling me to go on without him. I said there wasn't any hurry and the others wouldn't get too far ahead of us. Surface conditions were calm but walking over boulders to the water in full gear was difficult and tiring. We did see numerous rays, large crabs, several eels, and basket stars as well as a small octopus

that was rescued from a crab by one of the divers. It lost one tentacle but it was a small price to pay for the rescue. After the ordeal, it seemed willing to let the divers hold and pet it. I ran out of air early, which was strange for me. Since I didn't have a night light, I signaled my return to the beach and crawled my way back.

Our last day of diving, THE SUN CAME OUT. With the change in weather and surface conditions, it was determined that we could make a dive on Little Cayman - the third island in the chain. The boat ride was going to be long so the cooler was packed and we left at 9 AM. Little Cayman is about the size of Cayman Brac but not nearly as populated - the island terrain is more rugged. Actor Burgess Meredith had a house on the island at the time. The island may have been nondescript but the diving was anything but.



"Bloody Bay Wall" was renowned as one of the world's finest wall dives, and I can certainly understand why. Pristine waters with unlimited visibility and a vertical wall dropping off to what seemed infinity. No litter, no current, extremely clean fans and sponges in every color imaginable. Enormous anemones and large schools of fish made this dive one of our most memorable. Among the divers was the hotel's photographer taking plenty of individual and group photos. They presented a slide show that evening where we could purchase copies, which we did.

That afternoon, we made our last dive for the trip at "Fantastic Reef" on Little Cayman. And it was fantastic. A clean shallow reef dive, we spent a large amount of time in a clearing that seemed to attract large schools of fish and some larger fish including a grouper that you could pet if so inclined. Off to the deeper side of the wall was a pair of spotted eagle rays that probably had a 20 foot wing span. There were Queen Conch alive and littering the sands everywhere. Majestic angel fish with their gold-trimmed scales and eyes, and a large barracuda smiling pretty for the photographer. The fish and coral all seemed brighter and bigger than anywhere else.

All in all, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac were both excellent dive islands and the Tiara Beach Hotel was a comfortable and hospitable stay. The dive operation was top notch and the food was excellent. If it hadn't been for the weather, the trip might have been ideal.

But, fate wasn't finished with us yet. We paid our fee to leave the island, went through customs, and retraced our flight back to Chicago. We went through customs there and ran to catch our connecting flight. There was no need to hurry, the flight had been delayed six hours due to fog.